

VOLUNTEERS IN THE COURTS

THE WISCONSIN SUPREME COURT ♦ P.O. BOX 1688 ♦ MADISON, WI 53701-1688
EXCERPT FROM *THE THIRD BRANCH*

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Mentoring Probationers Can Turn Lives Around

It is sometimes said that there is a revolving door directing people in and out and in and out of court. That a first offense often leads to a long-term relationship with the justice system. Mary Westphal has worked with offenders for more than 14 years. She sees a different revolving door—one that can turn a person around.

Westphal is a volunteer mentor to first-time offenders sentenced to probation. The program, Volunteers in Probation (VIP), is one component of Outagamie County's Volunteers in Offender Services (VIOS). The program helps offenders complete their court-ordered obligations so that they may ultimately have their records expunged.

Westphal meets with one probationer for about an hour each week to find out if the person is fulfilling court-ordered obligations, or if there are potential problems that may lead to a probation violation. She reminds them of the terms of their probation and any other obligations that she is aware of, for example, returning a library book or arriving at an important appointment on time. The weekly meetings may last for as little as six months, to more than a year.

According to Westphal, spending time in jail can be easier than being on probation. In jail, simple rules must be followed. But on probation, tasks must be accomplished—completing community service, paying restitution, staying out of trouble. No one is there every day making sure probationers fulfill their obligations. But, Westphal said, as a volunteer probation officer one can “hopefully be a listening board” in

a way that helps people solve their own problems and become self-sufficient.

Mentors also serve as a clearinghouse for community resources and services by helping clients find places to complete their community service or get back their driver's licenses. The VIOS office keeps volunteers abreast of the programs and services available in the community so that they can direct clients to education opportunities, drug/alcohol counseling, financial assistance, and other services.

VIP mentors do not replace professional staff, but

instead enhance the quality and quantity of services available for offenders. Unlike professional probation officers with heavy caseloads, volunteers work with one client at a time; therefore, they often have more time to look for the root of the problem. VIP mentors try to find out what their clients want to accomplish—getting a GED, applying to colleges or technical schools, becoming a better parent, learning how to manage money—and they look for ways to help them meet those goals. In one situation a recent high school graduate who had gotten into trouble was matched with a local businessman. Together they visited post-secondary schools and met with counselors. The client is currently attending a local technical school.

The VIP concept was started in the early 1960s by Keith J. Leenhouts, a circuit court judge in Royal Oak, MI. Leenhouts saw the same individuals return to his court again and again. He believed the traditional criminal justice system did not give offenders an opportunity to change their lives, so he recruited community volunteers to serve as mentors. Leenhouts is now the director of the Court Volunteer

Services Division of the National Judicial College.

In 1972, Outagamie County Judge Nick F. Schaefer, now a reserve judge, brought this idea to Wisconsin with

“Teaching the Joy of Service”

by: Justice Ann Walsh Bradley

*Excerpt from a speech given at the Marathon County
Mentoring Summit, Oct. 9, 1999*

A wise person once said that the greatest good we can do for others is not to share our riches, but to reveal theirs. But how do we, as mentors, provide something more meaningful? How do we help a child to experience his own strength, courage, and capacity for joy? I believe we accomplish that by giving the child an opportunity to serve as a volunteer in this community, for it is through service to others that each of us understands our own intrinsic value. Indeed, the very act of asking children to join us in volunteer work tells them that they have a worthwhile contribution to make to their community. No longer is the child a passive recipient of a charitable adult's attention; rather, he or she is now a working, giving, vital part of something larger.

As we all search for meaning, not only the meaning in our own lives (as big kids), but also in helping others (little kids) find meaning, I find over and over again the importance of service and the importance of being a part of something larger than yourself, finding meaning by extending beyond ourselves to serve others.

Outagamie County's VIP, which matched volunteers from the community with offenders on probation. In 1985, VIP merged with a county program that provided services to Huber (work-release) inmates to become VIOS. This county-funded program now coordinates VIP, jail rehabilitation, and community service. In operation for almost 28 years, VIOS has more than 125 volunteers serving as role models, teachers, and counselors.

Research by the National Institutes of Health indicates that probationers who are matched with volunteer mentors are 11.5 times less likely to re-offend. The study compared 100 probationers in a court using traditional probation to 100 probationers also matched with volunteers and other community resources. During the five years after the first offense, the traditional probationers had 270 additional convictions, while the probationers matched with volunteers only had 23 additional convictions. Outagamie County's VIP program reflects the national picture. Each year, VIP works with 150 to 200 people on probation. According to Stu Driessen, VIOS coordinator since 1978, only about 30 people who are matched with a mentor re-offend during their probation period.

In all her years with VIP, Westphal has never learned of a client re-offending. "I'm very proud of that," she said.

While VIP serves all ages, it targets offenders between 18 and 30 who have been convicted of a misdemeanor such as drug possession, disorderly conduct, or theft. "These are often people who never had a significant role model," Driessen said. Older offenders are more often recommended for counseling for anger management, parenting, and drug and alcohol abuse. Some counseling is also offered through VIOS.

The volunteers try to model a life that balances work and leisure, and includes healthy relationships and financial responsibility. "[Mentors] give options and alternatives, not advice... so [probationers] may make better choices," Driessen said. By helping probationers learn life management skills, the mentors hope to make a first offense a last offense, which saves tax dollars by keeping people out of the criminal justice system.

"Sometimes people are too busy in their own turmoil to look to the future, so we try to put a mirror to their face and say 'here's how to change it,'" Driessen said.

VIP programs are also running in Brown, Marathon, Oconto, and Winnebago counties.

For more information about VIOS, call (920) 832-5160. For information on VIP programs and technical assistance, contact the Court Volunteer Services Division of the National Judicial College at (800) 255-8343 or visit their Web site at www.judges.org/volunteer/.

Training for Volunteer Coordinators

The annual Wisconsin Volunteer Coordinators' Training Institute will be held on May 4 and 5 at the Sheraton Inn, Madison. *Building the Y2K Volunteer: Planning for the Millennium* will include workshops focusing on technological needs and challenges of volunteer programs, grant writing, trends in volunteer management, developing partnerships, and more. The cost is still to be determined; scholarship funds will be available. The event is sponsored by the Wisconsin Volunteer Coordinators Association (WVCA).

For more information and to register, contact Ingrid Marshall at the Rock County Health Care Center, (608) 757-5351; e-mail: marshall@co.rock.wi.us.

Share Your Story: Why Volunteer?

April is National Volunteers Month. To recognize the volunteers who work in Wisconsin's courts, and the court employees who volunteer in their communities, we wish to share your stories in the spring issue of *The Third Branch*. Why do you volunteer? How do volunteers make a difference? Please submit just a few sentences or a brief essay (under 250 words):

- to tell the story of someone you believe is an exceptional volunteer (we will contact that person prior to printing the story),
- to tell your own story of volunteering in a court-related or community program, or
- to tell of someone who has been helped by a court volunteer.

Photographs of volunteers at work are also welcome if accompanied by a description and the name and telephone number of the photographer.

Include your name, county, and telephone number with your submission and send it to: *Volunteers in the Courts*, Wisconsin Supreme Court, P.O. Box 1688, Madison, WI 53701-1688. You may also fax submissions to (608) 261-8299, or e-mail them to karen.leonedenie@courts.state.wi.us.

The deadline is March 6. (Submissions will be printed as space permits).

For information on the *Volunteers in the Courts* initiative contact Karen Leone de Nie, Program Assistant to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, at (608) 266-1298 or by e-mail at karen.leonedenie@courts.state.wi.us.